

# The Alexander Thomson Society NEWSLETTER

Nº14, DECEMBER 1995



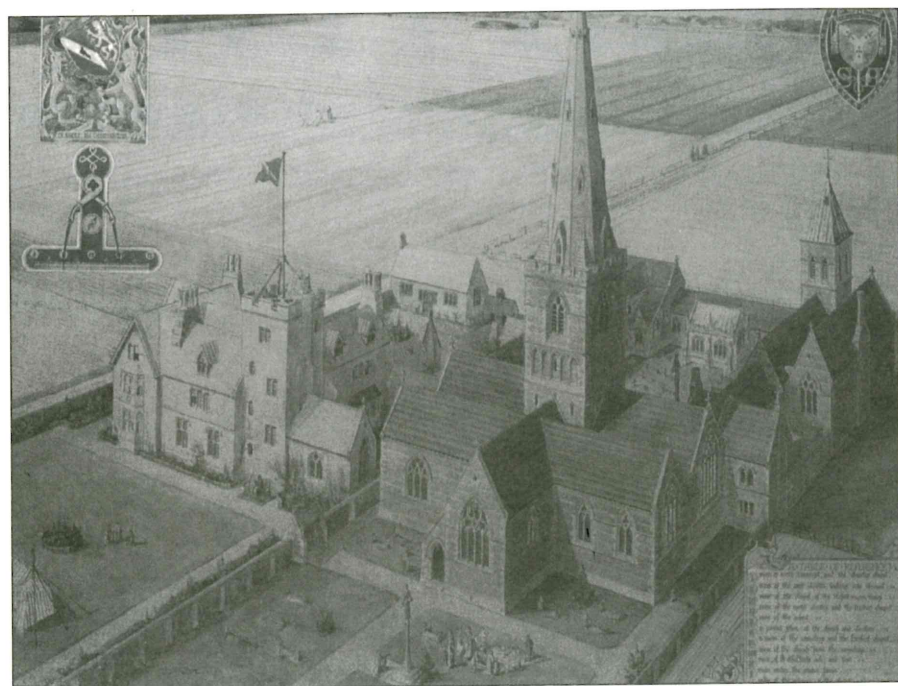
## HOLMWOOD DOWN UNDER



**Thomson at  
the Festival  
AGM Report  
Winter  
Lectures**



# In Defence of Pugin



"We are... told we should adopt it because it is the Christian style, and, strange to say, this most impudent assertion has been accepted as sound doctrine even by earnest and intelligent Protestants, whereas it ought only to have force with those who believe that Christian truth attained its purest and most spiritual development at the period when this style of architecture constituted its corporeal frame..."

**S**UCH was Thomson's view of Gothic and, by implication, of its passionate Catholic advocate, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-52), author of *The True*

*Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*. Thomson is scarcely likely to have approved of Pugin, but we must be more tolerant.

The Pugin Society has been founded "to do everything possible to promote the name and work of Pugin" and this includes trying to save his own remarkable house at Ramsgate: *The Grange (the house with the flagpole, above left)*. We wish the society well.

Details of the Pugin Society may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, Catriona Baker, 122 Grange Road, Ramsgate, Kent CT11 9PT.

## SMUDGE

**T**HE Society has joined, as a corporate member, the Traditional Paint Forum. This new society has been founded to encourage a better understanding and appreciation of traditional paint. As such knowledge must affect the restoration of Thomson's own elaborate decorative paint schemes – as at Holmwood – we welcome the advent of the Forum, which will publish an annual journal as well as a newsletter entitled *Smudge*.

Further information from the Hon. Sec., Una Richards, c/o Simpson & Brown, 179 Canongate, Edinburgh EH8 8BN.

## Our New Patron

**W**E are very pleased that the Earl of Glasgow has agreed to join Professors Andor Gomme and Andrew MacMillan as a Patron of The Alexander Thomson Society.

An earlier Earl of Glasgow commissioned the English Gothickist William Butterfield to build the Cathedral of the Isles at Millport and the Episcopalian Cathedral at Perth (thereby helping to ruin the family's fortunes). Of course, he ought to have employed Thomson, but all is forgiven.

## CASES

### St Vincent Street Church

We regret that there is little to report. Very slow progress continues to be made but decisions are needed: by the new united congregation about whether it wishes to stay in the St Vincent Street Church, and by the City Council about whether to support the establishment of a charitable trust to restore and to manage the building.

### Glasgow Cross

\*We continue to be most concerned about the deteriorating condition of the beautiful warehouses in Watson Street and Bell Street by Thomson & Turnbull. Over the summer, both buildings were acquired by an Edinburgh developer seeking to rehabilitated them for domestic occupation and, in co-operation with the Planning Department, the Department of Building Control agreed not to enforce a dangerous structure notice if essential stabilising work was carried out. However, no work took place and listed building consent for demolition has been applied for on the northern block formerly owned by Bass Holdings. We hope that this is a measure intended to ensure that necessary work is carried out. As we never tire of pointing out, Glasgow cannot afford to lose buildings of this quality, whose sur-

*Continued on Page 3*

### THE ALEXANDER THOMSON SOCIETY COMMITTEE

*Chairman:* Gavin Stamp

*Hon. Secretary:* Dominic d'Angelo

*Hon. Treasurer:* Sam McKinstrey

*Hon. Minutes Secretary:*

Colin McKellar

*Committee:* Mark Baines, Michael Davis, Roger Guthrie, John McAslan, Pippy McEwen, Mary Miers, Alexander Stoddart.

*Our Patrons are*

The Earl of Glasgow, Professor Andor Gomme and Professor Andrew MacMillan.



vival and rehabilitation is crucial to the long-overdue regeneration of Glasgow Cross.

## Egyptian Halls

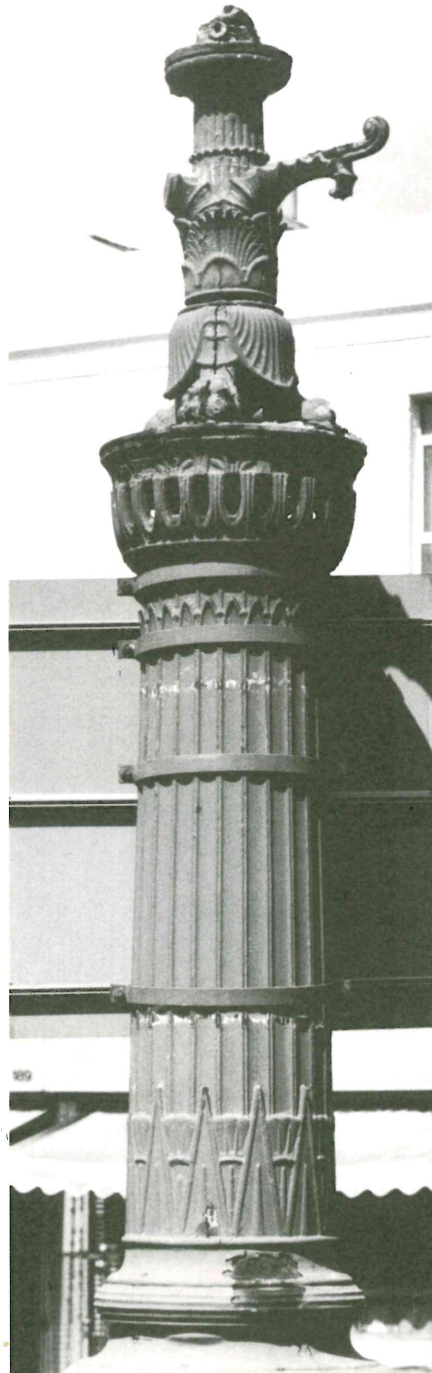
We are pleased to be able to report progress. A restoration and rehabilitation scheme for Thomson's finest commercial building has been prepared by the Douglas McConville Partnership on behalf of the owners of the four ground floor shops. This has been submitted for, and has received planning permission. The problem remains the owner of the upper floors, Mr Man Fung Lung, and we trust that the City Council will now ensure by all available means that this gentleman at last co-operates in this vital attempt to secure the future of this building. What is now clear is that, owing to years of culpable and unnecessary neglect, the condition of Egyptian Halls is perilous and that it is essential that works proceeds next year: without such work, this coming winter may well prove to be the building's last.

Meanwhile, the City Centre Community Council has submitted an application for the reinstatement of the six cast-iron lighting pillars which originally stood outside Egyptian Halls. This is an excellent and perfectly feasible proposal; as reported in *Newsletter* N°8, casts of these Saracen Foundry products survive in south-east London (*right*) and can be copied.

## Caledonia Road Church

Alan McCartney, projects consultant to the Historic Buildings Trust, continues to battle to persuade the several bureaucratic empires that run this city to co-operate in taking action to restore the Caledonia Road Church.

We agree with him that now is the moment to achieve something positive. As we have long argued, the church should not remain as a mere ruin but must be integrated into the Crown Street Redéveloppement to serve a useful purpose. We fully support the brilliant proposal by the Historic Buildings Trust to move the dual carriageway currently planned to divide the church from the new development over to the WEST of the church by demolishing the



redundant railway viaduct. As described in previous *Newsletters*, this will enable the church to be integrated properly into an urban development and allow a contiguous development to the north behind the present ruin. It will also enable the line of Hospital Street to be made straight and parallel with the east wall of the church – something which we regard as essential to restoring the integrity of Thomson's overall design.

The Roads Department of Strathclyde Regional Council is now looking seriously at these proposals, which have the qualified approval of both Glasgow City Council and the British Rail Property Board.

Furthermore, the Glasgow Development Agency has now set up a team to pursue the removal of the redundant viaduct together with the enhancement of the viaduct to the north which is to be retained. Unfortunately, the Crown Street Regeneration Project (funded by the GDA) has voiced "concern about the technical and economic viability of [the] proposal to re-route the Central Area Link Road to the west of the Church, and about its potentially devastating effect on the townscape of the local area." As there is no "townscape" whatever at present to give meaning to the forlorn and pathetic ruin of Thomson's great church, it is hard to understand what this means. And surely a major road between the church and the new housing cannot be regarded as in any way desirable.

What with Glasgow as UK City of Architecture and Design in 1999, we believe it is essential that all interested parties now co-operate to do something positive with Thomson's masterpiece. At present, what survives of the vandalised and burned-out church merely serves to emphasise the failure of three decades of planning in the Gorbals. If it continues to survive merely as a ruin into the next century, it will remain as an indictment of a fourth decade of ineffectual and unimaginative planning in Glasgow as well as of apparent official indifference to the fate of the city's historic buildings. This is an opportunity which must not be missed.

The Historic Buildings Trust is now investigating a suitable end use for the church.

## Rockland, Helensburgh

We, along with the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland, were dismayed to learn that Dumbarton District Council granted planning permission for a single-storey residential development in the former vegetable garden of Thomson's Helensburgh villa [listed category 'A' and in a conservation area]. Although some distance from Rockland itself (although not from the lodge), the proposed new structure is not sympathetic in design. Too many of Thomson's villas have been spoiled by high density development of their grounds.



# EVENTS

## THE ALEXANDER THOMSON SOCIETY

### Annual General Meeting

Around seventy members attended the 5th AGM of the Society at 4 Great Western Terrace, courtesy of the owners. Those attending heard Gavin Stamp review the work of the Society in recent months (*see Cases*), welcome the Society's new Patron, the Earl of Glasgow, and outline the work that still needs to be undertaken, while the Hon. Secretary reported that membership continued at around 500 members, and urged members to consider taking out a Standing Order payment to the Society when membership renewal next falls due.

Dr Sam McKinstry, the Hon. Treasurer, was unable to be present. In his stead, Gavin Stamp reported on the continuing financial health of the Society, with income totalling just over £6,000 in the period 1st October 1994 to 30th September 1995, Expenditure of £4,200, and an overall surplus of just under £8,000. A copy of the Financial Statement appears in the next column.

In elections to the Society Committee, Dominic d'Angelo was re-elected as Hon. Secretary, Sam McKinstry as Hon. Treasurer and Colin McKellar as Hon. Minutes Secretary, while Roger Guthrie and Pippy McEwen were re-elected as members of the Committee.

### Winter Lecture Series

The 1996 Winter Lectures will take place on 7th and 21st February and on 6th March in the Lecture Theatre of the Mackintosh School of Architecture. Professor Andy MacMillan has agreed to give one of the lectures, while other speakers are to be confirmed. Further details will appear in the next issue of the *Newsletter*, due out in January 1996.

### Newcastle Weekend

Following the highly successful visit to Liverpool last April, we plan to mark Thomson's birthday next year by a weekend visit to Newcastle.

We shall see both the fine Classical buildings of that great city on the Tyne, many designed by John

### INCOME AND EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

for the period 1/10/94 to 30/09/95

INCOME	£	£
Subscriptions		3,881.76
Donations		42.50
Miscellaneous Income		2,153.50
Bank Interest		235.61
		6,313.37
<b>EXPENDITURE</b>		
Printing, Stationery and Postages	1,433.42	
Miscellaneous	2,786.84	
		4,220.26
<b>SURPLUS FOR PERIOD</b>		2,093.11

### BALANCE SHEET

as at 30/09/95

#### ASSETS

Balance at Bank	7,929.32
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#### FUNDS

Balance carried forward	5,836.21
Surplus from Income & Expenditure Account	2,093.11
	7,929.32

### NOTES TO THE ACCOUNTS

#### 1. Subscription Income

This is taken into the Accounts only when received.

#### 2. Bank Interest

Bank Interest is taken into the accounts when credited by the Bank.

*Dr. S. McKinstry*  
*Hon. Treasurer*

Dobson, and also Belsay Hall, that extraordinarily severe Grecian mansion to the north-west of the city which is one of the most important Neo-Classical monuments in Britain. We shall leave for Newcastle in the afternoon of Friday, April 12th, and return in the evening of Sunday, April 14th. For further details, please apply to the Chairman.

### West End Festival

The Society has agreed to participate in the West End Festival being staged in Glasgow in June 1996. We don't know what we're going to do yet, but we're going to do something!

### Sorry we're late!

We apologise for the late appearance of this *Newsletter* (it should have been out in October). Unfortunately a medley of other commitments have combined to hold things up. We should be back on schedule in January, when the next issue is scheduled to appear, with illustrations by Thomson and a letter from Thomson's brother-in-law which includes sketches of mosques in India.



# Meanwhile, back at the Temple...

PROFESSOR James Stevens Curl responds to Dr Sam McKinstry's observations on St Vincent Street as a mnemonic of the Temple of Solomon.

SAM McKinstry (*Newsletter* N°13, May 1995) took exception to my arguments that there is an affinity between Thomson's St Vincent Street church in Glasgow, and the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. I do indeed propose that Thomson's great church is a mnemonic of the Biblical structure, but it is also a statement of the longing to rebuild that structure in order to effect improvements in Man by rebuilding the Temple in hearts and minds and in structures that will be seen by many people.

I confess I find it extraordinary that McKinstry should adopt such a position. He grandly says he is "quite impressed" by my arguments regarding a symbolic/Freemasonic interpretation of aspects of Thomson's domestic interiors, but he seems blind to such elements in the churches. A building where The Word



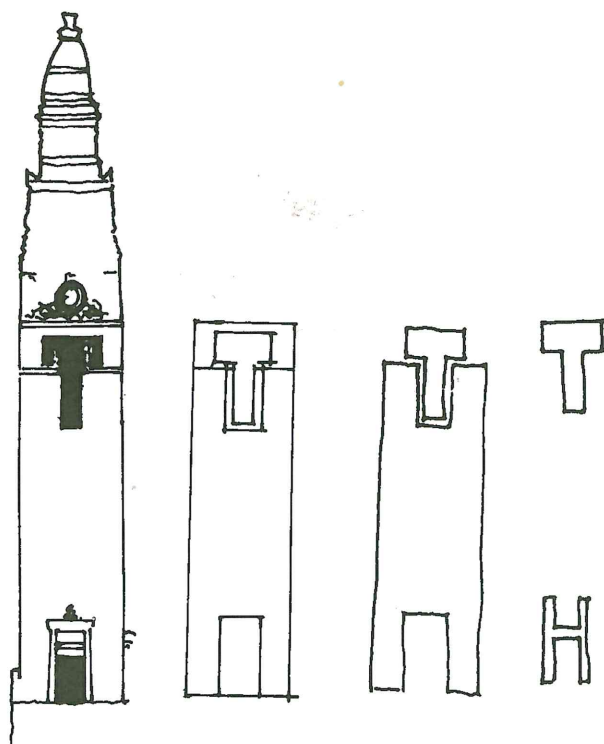
*St Vincent Street's Cherubims*

would be heard, and where Old Testament allusions played no small part, is more likely to have Biblical/Freemasonic/symbolic allusions than a dining-room (and indeed this is the case, if one bothers

to look). I am not going to give a blow-by-blow account of the allusions (I have counted some 23 so far) I have found in Thomson's religious buildings, as my text would fill several volumes of the *Newsletter*, so I will here confine myself to only one small aspect of just one part of one church.

McKinstry has written (*Newsletter* N°11, October 1994) about the herm-like forms facing each other and placed within the recesses under the clock-faces of the tower of the St Vincent Street church in Glasgow. He and Sandy Stoddart (among others) have seen that the stylised blocks that are shoulder-substitutes may be allusions to the wings of the Cherubims, and I accept that. In Exodus 25, verses 18-22 in the King James VI and I version of the Old Testament, it is stated that the faces of the Cherubims 'shall look one to another', and there they are in Thomson's building, looking at each other. McKinstry cannot go further, however. He seems unable to connect the Cherubims 'within the inner house' (I Kings 6, v.27) with Thomson's obvious symbolism. The herm-like Cherubims in his building are set within a very clear (and curious) T-shaped recess on each face of the tower.

Now Thomson's churches are no ordinary buildings, and are far too interesting, complex, and puzzling to be taken at face value as eclectic pile-ups of Classical Graeco-Egyptianising bits and pieces. It is this very oddness that attracts the enquiring mind. So what is the significance of the T-shaped recesses? T is the *Tau* cross, which, in Freemasonic iconography, signifies nothing other than the lost Temple of Solomon. The Cherubims are set *within the Temple* (T), an explicit architectural and symbolic statement which yells at us if we bother to look up. Furthermore, if we trouble to examine that singular tower, we see that the T-shaped



*Continued on Page 9*



# That Other Holmwood

**I**N *Newsletter* N°6 we revealed the existence of a Holmwood clone in Adelaide, Australia – a house based on the designs published in the book *Villa and Cottage Architecture*.

In August, Gavin Stamp had the pleasure of meeting Mr Ian Crawford of Claremont, Western Australia, who was born and brought up in the Antipodean Holmwood. Having revisited the original house in Cathcart, Mr Crawford most kindly presented the Society with information about and photographs of the house his family once owned in Adelaide.

**H**OLMWOOD, in North Walkerville, Adelaide, was built in about 1885 by William Austin Horn (1841–1922), described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as a “mining magnate, pastoralist and politician.” In 1897 he left Australia to live in Wimbledon, returning in 1907 to sell Holmwood which, in 1911, was bought by the Crawford family, who owned it until 1971.

Mr Crawford writes of the house that, “The distinctive feature of the design of Holmwood is that it is a series of Greek temples on an acropolis rather than one simple temple as used by Palladio and subsequently Robert Adam and Wyatt in the 18th century in England. Moreover, during the 19th century classical forms had become unpopular, being eclipsed by Gothic and in Australia subsequently by an Italianate style which in the 1880s had been used for many Adelaide villas... The return to classical forms came later in the century and is more associated with the turn of the century and the Edwardian period. It is interesting therefore that Horn had adopted a style which was considered novel in Glasgow thirty years before and ahead of its time in Adelaide.

“The execution of the building of the two houses is very different. The

Adelaide house is larger, although many references to it describe it as smaller, and the motifs are less refined. Thomson introduced some novel architectural forms, for example, the windows in the Scottish house are in a timber frame behind the ‘pillars’ forming the bay in the drawing room, and in the temple facade of the dining room and upstairs bedroom [sic]; whereas the Adelaide house has conventional windows within the walls. The Adelaide house has a curious feature of curved glass windows on the drawing room...”

Inspection of photographs reveals that the internal treatment of the rooms in the Adelaide house is quite different from those in Cathcart – the position of the staircase is reversed – and there are external differences – as with the fenestration of the first floor drawing room. But one significant congruity is that there is no window above the entrance, for the win-

dow lighting the staircase in Cathcart is an early 20th century intervention which, we trust, the National Trust for Scotland will eliminate.

## Brothers-in-houses

Another similarity between the Holmwood in the North Walkerville district of Adelaide and that in Cathcart is that both were built as homes for one of a pair of brothers, the other of whom built another house in the same grounds in a completely different style: Sunnyside, in the case of Glasgow, and Monaro in the case of Adelaide. Again, in both cases the non-Thomson houses have been demolished. And just to make life further complicated, both pairs of houses had educational connections: Holmwood itself as a school for many years, and Monaro owned by Emmanuel College for twenty years



*Cover photograph: Holmwood ca. 1892 before the construction of a schoolroom and schoolmaster's room to the left of the main house, later converted into a billiards room.*

*Above right: Holmwood in 1960 with members of the Crawford family, and the added billiards room, still later converted into a sitting room.*

*Left: The main staircase, the reverse of the staircase in Glasgow.*





until 1956, when Colin Crawford, then living in Holmwood, purchased Monaro, demolished it, and broke up the adjacent plots for housing.

In the case of many Thomson homes, research into their original owners has yet to be undertaken in any detail. In the case of the Australian Holmwood, Ian Crawford tells in an unpublished manuscript of the background to the two Adelaide houses:

"Holmwood and the neighbouring Monaro had been built by William Austin Horn and Thomas Sutherland Horn respectively. They were brothers, the most famous being W.A. Horn but by this time W.A. Horn had gone to live in England and T.S. Horn had sold Monaro.

"The entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Vol. 9, p.367) relating to W. A. Horn states: "HORN, WILLIAM AUSTIN (1841 - 1922), mining magnate, pastoralist and politician, was born on 26 February 1841 at Menaro, New South Wales, eldest son of Edward Kirk Horn, storekeeper, and his wife Emily, nee Austin. They moved to South Australia 1852 where Horn

entered the Collegiate School of St Peter. Afterwards he worked on (Sir) Walter Hughes's property at Wallaroo and while he was there a shepherd Patrick Ryan, found copper ore. Hughes learned from Ryan the exact location, then contacted Horn, who had started on a trip asking him to return. A rival syndicate had left for Adelaide seventeen hours before to lodge a claim; Hughes told Horn to try to reach Adelaide before 10 a.m. the next day to forestall them. After a marathon ride of 164 miles (264 km) in twenty-two hours, Horn reached the lands office but found the rival syndicate there. When the clerk opened the office he recognised Horn and processed his claim first. The other syndicate also lodged a claim and the matter was investigated by a select committee which reported against Hughes but left it to be settled in court. Hughes settled out of court, paying thousands of pounds for one of the richest mines in Australia; Horn became a shareholder."

"Horn invested in sheep stations including properties in New South Wales on the still undiscovered site of

Broken Hill. He was a director of the Silverton Mine assisted in the building of the Silverton Railway and when Broken Hill was discovered he became a shareholder in Broken Hill Proprietary Co. he became a parliamentarian in 1887 and retired from politics in 1893. During this period he built Holmwood. In 1894 he organised and equipped the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia. After its results were published he left Australia in 1897... and from 1898 lived at Park House at Wimbledon where legend has it he imported mallee roots [a scrubland variety of *Eucalyptus*] for his fires.

"Horn also built Wairoa in the Adelaide Hills as his summer house. This house was subsequently bought by the Gosses and was used in the 1975 film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*."

In 1907 he returned to Australia to a house in which all the contents had been left in the hands of a caretaker.. On August 18, 1911 W. A. Horn, a Gentleman of "Parts beyond the Sea" sold to "R. Crawford, Adelaide, Gentleman", the house he had built ahead of its time, about 12 acres of land, and all its furniture.



# 'SCOTLAND'S MOST ORIGINAL CLASSICIST'

ARCHITECTURAL exhibitions are notoriously difficult. Buildings, especially great ones are – like the minds of their creators – complex phenomena and best experienced first hand. This makes it difficult to explore either within the medium of an essentially two-dimensional display, let alone the inevitably limited constraints of time, space and finance. Exhibitions are condensed experiences but, nevertheless, they must retain a didactic balance of content and atmosphere conducive to visitors engaging with the subject matter, ultimately drawing their own conclusions from the material on view for themselves.

This was the second exhibition of Alexander Thomson's work with which I have been involved. The first was organised by the Mackintosh School of Architecture in 1984 and held in the Third Eye Centre (now the CCA) in Glasgow and subsequently shown in the Architectural Association in London, who also produced the modest but elegant catalogue which is rapidly becoming prized as a collection item.

Much has happened in the interval. Then the exhibition sought to re-awaken and stimulate interest in the work of the city's most neglected architect. Concentrating on facade models, new as well as original drawings, it attempted to demonstrate the breadth and meticulous rigour that underpins Thomson's prodigious output. Today Alexander Thomson is known, the Thomson Society formed and actively engaged in promoting the protection and preservation of his buildings whilst at the same time exploring the intellectual and cultural background of the architect and his work. A recently published book *Greek Thomson*, edited by Gavin Stamp and Sam McKinstry, preceded this latest exhibition. Both are seen as significant agents in this continuing and fascinating process.

The exhibition was commissioned by the RIAS for its annual Festival exhibition in its Edinburgh headquarters in Rutland Square. The



design was organised around Gavin Stamp's selection of material and storyline as well as the particular constraints of the two gallery spaces. The use of photographs as the principal medium for portraying the buildings made this a deliberately accessible exhibition. This was further illuminated by the inclusion of some of Thomson's original drawings and occasionally by Gavin's descriptive texts and pertinent and witty quotes (those from Thomas Gildard spring quickly to mind).

The free-standing exhibition framework, in white painted timber and cloth was designed to provide an appropriate ambience and coherent backdrop to the exhibits whilst screening the distracting elements; doors, furniture, fireplaces, paintings and even a storage heater present within the gallery spaces.

The lower gallery display provided the historical background, influence and available sources to Thomson's life and work. At its centre stood the Garnkirk Urn designed by Thomson for the 1858 London Exhibition. Surrounding this, images of Glasgow and its buildings, extracts from Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, the work of Karl Friedrich Schinkel and the dramatic paintings of John Martin attempted to demonstrate Thomson's ability to absorb and

transpose ideas across time, space and culture and channel them into the profound development of an architectural language, the very conciseness of which nevertheless provided the elements for innumerable compositional variations.

The upper gallery illustrated how Thomson extended that language to encompass a whole range of building types for which he was commissioned: terraces, tenements, commercial buildings, villas and churches. The gritty reality of the large format photographs vividly demonstrated the sense of repose, the commandingly dignified presence of the buildings, with their uncompromisingly physical robustness so acutely offset by the delicacy of the more orthodox ornamentation.


Through all of this it seems to me that Thomson's work, like that of all great architects, requires little or no historical justification, for all precedent is ingeniously assimilated and appropriately re-invigorated to the extent that the innate integrity of the buildings makes them exemplary in their own right. When taken together as a body of work, the intellectual resourcefulness and architectural skill is all the more impressive in its sheer scope, and the assurity of the buildings.

Mark Baines



# Solomon's Temple, Glasgow

Continued from Page 5

recesses are set over elongated H-shapes, and the T and the H are found in several positions in the church, notably framed within the curious Graeco-Egyptian pylon-like elements that embrace paraphrases of the Thrasyllus Order. The Tau  cross over H (right) signifies *Templum Hierosolymae*, or the Temple of Jerusalem (i.e. Temple of Solomon). TH is also a signature, standing for Hiram of Tyre (who was involved in the building of the Temple of Solomon), and may even be a signature of THomson himself. Furthermore, the clock-faces over the Tau crosses suggest the Egyptian Ankh, identified with the nimbus and Cross of the Crucifixion, signifying Eternal Life, Resurrection, and Triumph over Death. As Thomson's architecture contains many Egyptian as well as Greek references, and as we know he understood Egyptian architecture, such an allusion would not have eluded him. He was, after all, an extremely intelligent, observant, and gifted man, steeped in Biblical lore, and clearly not unaware of Freemasonic and other symbolism.

But what of the extraordinary pile-up on top of the tower, leading to that strangely Oriental lantern-like cap? The four powerful pylon-like elements suggest something sacred built on the Ideal, but the crowning element itself has a geometry on plan that is obviously based on the Hexalpa, or six-pointed star, standing for the Universe and Cosmic Order, but also (most significantly), is a symbol of Solomon's Seal (*Sigillum Salomonis*, as it is described in Kircher's *Œdipus Ægyptiacus*). As if this were not enough, there are twelve colonnettes supporting the upper part of the lantern, the bases of which are incised with triangular patterns set over a continuous strip of interlocked T-shaped frets. Adoration of the Most High in the Temple takes place at High Twelve, and operative Masons cease work at High Noon, when the Sun is *on its*



*Meridian*. The High Twelve stand over the clock, too.

I propose that Thomson's church is not only a mnemonic of the Lost Ideal, the Temple of Solomon, but tells us, loudly and clearly, that it IS the reconstructed Temple in Glasgow. TH, the Temple of Jerusalem, is written all over the building, and the highest part of that

building is capped with the Seal of Solomon himself. This is no *Non Sequitur*. It is more *QED*.

*James Stevens Curl is the author of The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry (London: B T Batsford, 1991) and Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival as a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).*



# Dear George...

THE last of the five letters we have that Alexander Thomson wrote to his brother George in West Africa is, like the others, much taken up with financial matters. As usual, there is information about the rents coming from the brothers' building in Gordon Street – the Grosvenor Building – but this letter is mostly taken up with an account of the arbitration case between the Thomsons' friend, the accountant and developer, Henry Leck, and the Caledonian Railway Company which was seeking to acquire property to build what would become Glasgow Central Station. This and other documents reveal both Thomson's almost obsessive interest in making precise valuations – confidently recorded figures down to the last three-farthings – and the very high value of property in the heart of Glasgow in the 1870s. This letter was written on very thin paper and is not at all easy to decipher.

The next news that we presume George had of his brother was melancholy. As recounted in *Newsletter* N°11, the missionary returned to Scotland in the spring of the following year, 1875, and received a letter from his sister at Madeira *en route* informing him that Alexander Thomson had died in Glasgow on March 22nd.

1 Moray Place, Glasgow  
20th Aug 1874

Dear George

I send you herewith the half year's statement for Gordon Street which you will observe is unfavourable from the heavy accounts and loss of Colquhoun's rent. I send you also note of rental for current year and next fine so far as fixed by leases from which you will see that next half year's will be about £90 better in rents and as far as I know the accounts will be light so that you may look for a fair balance at Martinmas.

As to the state of affairs between you and I – there are still several of the old accounts which I have not yet got payment of – chiefly Mr. Robertson's for Union Street about £200 which I expect to get very soon

as I have now got in Lyall & Leckie's measurement which is the last of the accts according to my last calculation I was owing you about £130 I have since paid for you about £45. Having a balance of £85 or so and there is just now £10 in the Bank but your order which came the other day is not yet made up and of course will come off the present balance but do not stint yourself unnecessarily for I can easily meet any moderate demand you may have occasion to make keep yourself quite easy on that point.

I have delayed sending you the statement for some weeks in order that I might be able to let you know the result of Leck's claim in the Railway Coy for the Alston Street store which for the last two or three months has been exciting a good deal of interest amongst those connected with property affairs – I forget the whole amount but it was at the rate of £50 per yd. and 10pr ct. for compulsory sale. The arbiters were for Leck. George Bell for the Railway Thomas Binnie and McJannet of Bannatyne's Kirkwood & McJannet as oversman – The case came in about three weeks ago and lasted three days. The arbiters differed and the oversman after two or three days consideration intimated his intention of awarding about £30 per yd. This put Leck into a terrible state, indeed he was nearly out of his mind about it. He demanded to be heard and in the meantime dictated a statement to a shorthand writer which he read at the appointed diet on Friday last occupying from 11 oc till 6 oc in doing so – His object in doing this was not with any hope of influencing McJannet's decision but to justify himself in making the claim – He had a shorthand writer taking notes of all that he read and all that was said at the diet which he means to print and distribute amongst those in whose good opinions he wishes to stand well as expected Mr McJannet adhered to his decision and issued his final award on Monday last. Leck is resolved if possible to reduce it and go before a ??? with[?] the case[?] He asserts that

McJannet was prejudiced in favour of the Railway Coy. having it appears tried to buy the property for the Coy. about two years ago – He also acted irregularly during the taking of evidence having stopped Leck in his examination without consulting the arbiters – which at the time was understood to signify that he was satisfied that Leck had proved his position – and moreover his decision was contrary to evidence He refuses to give any reasons.

I along with one or two others made plans of the property for reconstruction and applying rents that have been procured in Gordon Street at a rate of upwards of £50 was shown – The property built by Leck at the north east corner of Nile St. and Gordon Street gives an average rate of 6/3 pr ft. for the shop floor and as much as 4/6 pr ft for counting houses up one stair – Mr Frame's old property in Gordon Street up one stair has been let for a warehouse at 2/6 per ft. I mentioned to you formerly that Leck had bought Black's building beside us at £46 per yd. in April last George Bell and I valued it at £67500 on the footing of its being altered[?] into counting houses at a cost of £4000 or say £67.10 per yd. our calculations being based upon the rents got from Mr Leck's building at corner of Nile Street and Gordon Street already referred to. Tramways having been laid in Union Street Renfield St. & has made a great change in the aspects of these streets and we considered that the corner of Renfield Street would be by and by much more valuable than the corner of Nile Street – The north east corner of Nile Street and St Vincent Street was sold to be rebuilt at £65 per. yd and for the south west corner of Renfield Street and St Vincent Street that rate has been refused – I had an inquiry about our own property through Mr. Haig architect and indicated that £46 per. yd. would be looked for I saw him since but his client had gone from home. I wish you would send me a letter as soon as you can authorizing me to act for you in case a good offer should be made. Most people recommend us to hold



on but if I had my share I think I could turn it to account in such a way as to yield a good steady return and enable me to take things easy – Mr. Turnbull and I am getting on pretty well we are busy with a number of smallish jobs. A number of friends ask about your wellbeing. I met Duncan Turner a few weeks ago he said “I would like to see George home again – tell him I would give him a job “for Auld Lang Sine”. Every one is glad to hear that you are keeping your health so well – I think that you should write letters for publication in the papers those that appeared were very much relished indeed You should have in view to write a book about affairs in the West Coast of Africa your descriptions are capital – I think I told you that I had been engaged in delivering a course of lectures in the School of Arts last spring. They seemed to give general satisfaction and are being published in two of the architectural periodicals. When they are finished I will send you a copy. They will be put up in the form of a pamphlet. This paper is too thin to be written on both sides so I must stop. We are all well and all desire to be remembered to you

Your afft. Brother

A. Thomson

## NOTES

• “Mr. Robertson’s for Union Street...” refers, of course, to Thomson’s Egyptian Halls, referred to in the letter of 20th September, 1872 [*Newsletter* N°12]. Colin McKellar has found that Thomson’s client was James Henderson Robertson, iron manufacturer of Mulberry Bank, Sandyford, who subscribed £5:0:0d to the Thomson memorial fund. He was also (1853–73) the brother-in-law of Robert Blackie (another Thomson client). The title deeds reveal that Egyptian Halls passed in 1893 to John James Pollok and James Robertson Blackie, publisher, as heirs portioners of their uncle James Henderson Robertson. J.R. Blackie was the only son of Robert Blackie by his first wife Ann Robertson. Robertson also seems to have been Thomson’s client for the two tenement buildings erected immediately to the north of the Caledonia Road

Church.

• Lyall & Leckie were builders, of 58 North Woodside Road.

• William McJannet’s was a partner with Messrs Bannatynes, Kirkwood & McJannet, writers, of 151 West George Street.

• Henry Leck, accountant, acquired property to the south of Gordon Street in 1872-73. This was in Alston Street, which ran south of Gordon Street between Hope Street and Union Street and which disappeared entirely under the Caledonian Railway’s terminus. As the railway company had designs on this site for some time – as described in *Newsletter* N°13 – one wonders if Leck was making a shrewd speculation; his biography in the Chartered Accountants library states that, “he dealt extensively in heritable property and was so successful as to acquire for himself the estate of Hollybush in Dalrymple Parish, Ayrshire.” C.D.R. McKellar has investigated the Leck papers in the Strathclyde Regional Archive and writes the following: “Henry Leck’s claim was supported by evidence from twelve witnesses, each of whom made a precognition. In his own precognition Alexander Thomson stated that he had made plans for a new building on the site and after deducting building costs he valued the ground at £58,428:15s:1d. His joint valuation with George Bell of the property at the corner of Renfield and Gordon Street [Black’s Building] formed part of his precognition. Three other witnesses, George Lammie, W.J. Carswell and John Shearer, made valuations based on Alexander Thomson’s plans, and plans were also produced by Clarke & Bell, William Spence and John Baird.

“According to the list of witnesses, Alexander Thomson was scheduled to appear as Henry Leck’s second witness, but from the pencilled alterations to the list he may have been cross-examined eighth or seventh. However, it is possible that he did not attend the proceedings at all for a letter from A. & G. Thomson & Turnbull dated ‘Monday’ states that, ‘Mr A Thomson had a severe attack of indisposition on Thursday and has been confined to the house since. He is unable to come up to town today but if the proof extends over tomorrow

he may be well enough to appear then.’

“Although Henry Leck’s papers do not give the Caledonian Railway’s side of the case, a rough copy of Leck’s own precognition refers to the evidence that he had previously offered to sell the site ‘for which I claim £50 a yard at £30’ and continued, ‘the price asked then is not the measure of the value now.’

“William McJannet’s proposed findings, in which he valued the Alston Street store at £35,000 inclusive of compensation for compulsory sale and held the Caledonian Railway liable for all the expenses of the arbitration, were announced on July 31st. After ‘having heard the claimant for himself at great length and the agent for the respondents,’ William McJannet issued a note on August 17th in which he confirmed his proposed findings and made them formal.”

The final draft of the ‘Precognition of Alexander Thomson’ dated 1874 ran as follows: “I have had some experience in valuing property in business parts of Glasgow and am well informed as to the Claimants property and have made out a set of plans for new buildings. I have also made up a note of rental based upon my information and knowledge of the locality and description of premises amounting to £4443.15.5¾ which I value at seventeen years purchase amounting to £75545.15.1¾ I believe that £15 per square yard will erect these buildings amounting to £17115, leaving 58428.15.1¾ as the value of the ground being equal to £51.4.2 per square yard. For the interest on the price during reconstruction I give materials of the present stores which are good and of considerable value I think this sufficient as the whole or a large proportion of the digging for new building will not be required and a portion of the present foundation may also be available for the new. My plan is not made, however, with a view to these points. I know of a property at the north west corner of Gordon & Renfield Streets which I believe belongs to Mr Leck. I had occasion in the month of April last to make a valuation thereof along with Mr George Bell for Messrs R & JM Hill

*Continued on Page 12*



## Why not renew your Membership by Standing Order?

Memberships fall due for renewal in January 1996, and our next *Newsletter* will contain a Membership Renewal Form for those who pay their membership annually.

Of course, you could always take out a Standing Order to pay your membership of The Alexander Thomson Society: we're not planning to put the rates up for some years yet, it means we don't have to remind you and you won't have to bother to remember. And the 20p bank charge is cheaper than sending your cheque by post!

## WANTED: SYMPATHETIC OWNER



A FULL four-floor Thomson building (*above*) at 41 Oakfield Avenue is currently for sale through Roy Slater. The building has been previously used as a letting property (it was subdivided into five flats in 1973) and now contains four shower rooms (handy for those with children, especially since the house is opposite Hillhead High School), and fifteen apartments in all. Offers over £115,000. Call Angela Craig at Roy Slater on 0141 334 8111 for viewing.

## BACK ISSUES

OF THE Society's *Newsletter* are available, price 50p each plus 2 second class stamps, from the Hon. Secretary at the Society's address.

## Ιμποσσιβλε!\*

A new book, *Glasgow School of Art: The History* by Hugh Fergusson [The Foulis Press of the Glasgow School of Art, 1995] gives a useful account of the Haldane Academy Trust – of which Thomson was a Trustee – and explains its relationship with the School of Art. However, we cannot agree that, "The content of Thomson's [Haldane] lectures is uninspiring, and consists of very generalised observations. It is possible that they were tedious even to Victorian ears, and we can picture Thomson holding forth in his broad accent, in the manner of a Sunday School Superintendent, referring to his diagrams with a pointer, while the gas jets hiss and flare."

This, of course, is a matter of opinion, although we must wonder if Mr Fergusson has actually read Thomson's eloquent and stimulating lectures – which, at least, were his own unaided efforts unlike the often quoted lectures by C.R. Mackintosh. However, a further gratuitous assertion is simply absurd: "All who have written about 'Greek' Thomson remark on the 'fact' that he never travelled abroad, and in particular

had not visited Greece. However, there were no passports required in Thomson's day, and it was possible to sail from the Clyde to the Piraeus in little over a week, so that there is no reason why Thomson could not have visited Greece, or why any such visit should have been recorded."

Oh yes there is. Much of what we know about Thomson derives from obituaries and memoirs written by friends and family, all of whom confidently stated that the architect never travelled abroad. So the idea that Thomson could have secretly sloped off to Greece for a couple of weeks without his professional colleagues noticing – let alone his wife and young children – is simply preposterous. Why is it necessary to suggest otherwise? The fact that Nicholas Hawksmoor, Thomas Hamilton along with Thomson never crossed the English Channel surely suggests that foreign travel is hardly a prerequisite for interpreting the Classical language with conspicuous brilliance and originality.

\* *Literally,, 'Impossible!'*

## Dear George

*Continued from Page 11*

writers We found it very much under let the rental being £2478. and from calculations we then made it appeared to us by some little outlay a rental of £4000 could be obtained. I produce a copy of this Valuation..." This, and other documents, together with a 1:500 map of the Alston Street area showing Leck's properties, are held at the Strathclyde Regional Archive.

• The "course of lectures in the School of Arts" which Thomson had delivered were, of course, his celebrated Haldane Lectures on Egyptian, Greek and Roman architecture.

*As before, we are most grateful to Catherine Rentoul for allowing us to publish her great-grandfather's letters and to Colin D.R. McKellar for his painstaking and invaluable researches.*

## The Newsletter

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